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Waste pit placed on short list for Superfund action / Cleanup could reduce dioxin level of fish in the area

By BILL MURPHY
Staff

CORRECTION: This story incorrectly reported how much dioxin was found in soil at the San Jacinto River waste pits. Dioxin concentrations were as high as 70,000 parts per trillion, according to the EPA. Correction published 10/5/07.

A submerged industrial waste pit that has been contaminating the San Jacinto River, Ship Channel and Galveston Bay with dioxin for decades was put on the short list of potential Superfund sites.

State scientists believe that they ended their decades-long search for the cause of elevated dioxin levels in the region's fish when they discovered the waste pits two years ago.

Cleaning up the site - a potentially decade-long process - could slowly bring down dioxin levels in fish, allowing the state to rescind a 1990 advisory warning people about the hazards of eating blue crab and catfish caught in many of the region's waters.

Dioxin is classified as a suspect human carcinogen.

U.S. Rep. Gene Green, D-Houston, said, "I'm going to do everything I can to get the EPA to begin a cleanup of that site. Contamination from that site comes down into my district and the Ship Channel and goes out into Galveston Bay."

The EPA is accepting public comments until Oct. 19, on whether sites on the short list should become Superfund sites. It will decide by next spring whether the waste pit will become a Superfund site.

Under the law creating the Superfund program, the EPA can clean up abandoned hazardous waste sites and force responsible parties to carry out cleanups or pay for EPA-led cleanups.

The now-defunct McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corp. operated the 3.5-acre waste pit just north of the Interstate 10 bridge in Channelview, the EPA said on its Web site.

The waste pit was on land when McGinnes began operations probably in the 1960s and may have been shut down by the mid-1970s.

All or parts of the site later became submerged in the river, dispersing contaminants downstream.

A major customer of the waste pit was a paper mill near the Washburn Tunnel operated by Champion Paper Co., the EPA site said. The mill is closed, and Champion no longer owns it.

Paper mills used to generate dioxins and furans during the paper bleaching process. Dioxins and furans are chemical contaminants formed during combustion processes, such as waste incineration and forest fires, and during the manufacturing of herbicides and paper.

If the waste pit is added to the Superfund list, the EPA will develop a cleanup plan and search for responsible parties to help pay for it.

Green said that if the EPA is unable to identify any responsible parties, he would ask Congress to pass a special appropriation to fund the cleanup.

Astronomically high concentrations of dioxin were found in soil samples taken from the waste pits, said Larry Koenig, project manager of a Texas Commission on Environmental Quality dioxin study in the region.

They were as high as 70 billion (SEE CORRECTION) parts per trillion.

The state advises that those who eat seafood with concentrations at .47 part per trillion or higher could face potential harm.

The advisory issued by the Texas Department of State Health Services says women who are pregnant or nursing and children younger than 12 should not eat catfish and blue crab caught in the river, Upper Galveston Bay or the Ship Channel because of high dioxin levels.

Others should eat no more than an 8-ounce serving a month.

A similar advisory is in effect for all fish caught in the area because of high levels of PCBs and other contaminants.

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TAINTED WATER / Officials tour toxic waste site

STAFF

County, state and federal officials got a look at the dioxin-contaminated San Jacinto Waste Pits on Wednesday. The abandoned waste site north of Interstate 10 is expected to be named an EPA Superfund site.

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Section: This Week

San Jacinto River could get federal cleanup funds

STAFF

The Environmental Protection Agency has placed the San Jacinto River waste pits on a shortlist of potential Superfund sites.

The waste pits, located near the Interstate 10 bridge over the San Jacinto River, are contaminated with polychlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins, commonly called dioxins, and polychlorinated dibenzofurans, commonly called furans.

Wildlife in the area, including fish, have become contaminated with the pollutants, which can cause cancer and other health problems in humans.

Despite posted warnings, some residents continue to use contaminated parts of the river as a food source.

"This is a major step toward really getting the river cleaned up," said U.S. Rep. Gene Green, D-Texas. "I've been working with the EPA and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to get to this point when the source of the dioxin was discovered."

The pollution emanates from abandoned paper mill waste pits used in the 1960s and 1970s.

Scientists knew for many years that pollution levels in the San Jacinto River were high, but they didn't know why until recently when they discovered the pits.

In March, Green and Rep. Ted Poe, R-Humble, asked the EPA to designate the waste pits a Superfund site.

The Superfund designation would normally provide federal money to help clean up pollutants if the responsible parties aren't found or are insolvent. However, because appropriations for Superfund projects have dwindled in recent years, Green may have to make a special request in order to fund a cleanup of the site.

For more information, see the San Jacinto River waste pits entry on the EPA's Web site at www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/npl/nar1773.htm.

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State seeks EPA help with river

Industrial waste that has been polluting the San Jacinto River for decades is being considered for cleanup through the Environment Protection Agency's National Priorities List.

"The health of East Harris County residents has been harmed too long by these poisonous wastes," said U.S. Rep. Gene Green, D-Texas.

"This is a major step forward for the San Jacinto River and its surrounding areas."

In a letter to the EPA's regional administrator, Gov. Rick Perry expressed the state's support for the agency's plan to add the polluted area to the national list.

The state's support was necessary before the EPA could proceed with the cleanup process. Sites of the list are considered those in urgent need of cleanup.

Priority status expected

In September, the EPA will publish information about proposed cleanup sites in the Federal Register, accept public comments and attempt to identify parties responsible for the pollution. The EPA then will name sites from around the country for the priority list. The river's waste pits will most likely be included on the list, given Texas' cooperation. Officials said pollution levels had been high in the river for years, but scientists didn't know why until 2005 when they discovered the pit, which is located near the Interstate 10 bridge.

A February 2007 EPA report said the pit is releasing dangerous levels of polychlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins, commonly called dioxins, and polychlorinated dibenzofurans, commonly called furans.

In March, Green asked the EPA to add the site to the national Superfund list.